



509TH

Story and Photos
by Paula Schlag

SOLDIERS of the Joint Readiness Training Center's opposing force, the 1st Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment, traveled from Fort Polk, La., to Arlington National Cemetery, Va., in January to honor veterans of the airborne unit who fought in World War II. Joining in the wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknowns were several members of the original 509th Inf. Regt. who fought in Africa, Italy and France.

In the 612-acre national cemetery, 60 of the Fort Polk paratroopers looked down a series of steps leading to the plaza. There was silence. With 509th veterans and their families gathered at the top and spectators at a distance, the tomb guard called out, "Today we honor the 509th Parachute Infantry."

In full-dress uniform and red beret, LTC Jeffery Jarkowsky, the present 1st Bn., 509th commander, accompanied by World War II veteran Marty Galuskin wearing a red beret with prominently displayed 509th Regt. "Geronimo" patch, approached the front of the plaza and laid the wreath.

The bugler played "Taps," and the

crowd remained motionless as a cool, soft breeze blew.

"I can't put into words the feeling that I had at that moment. I had flashbacks to some of those places we were in," said Galuskin.

He had worked for two years with other veterans and government officials to make this day happen.

"I can only say that the ceremony was long overdue," he said. "I hope that Americans remember the sacrifice of so many."

Jarkowsky, who leads the 1st Bn. OPFOR in exercises to train light infantry units at Fort Polk, said this day would never be forgotten.

"It's an important mark in our history," he said. "For we have just honored our soldiers in a way that America can never forget. It was an honor for us to participate. We owe gratitude."

"I was honored, proud and even more committed to learning more about our history," said SGT Joseph Healey, a former Tomb Guard who is now a member of the 1st Bn., 509th Inf. "This one meant everything to me."

"With mutual pride, brotherhood and respect for one another, it's important for me and my soldiers to make a

connection on this day and every day," said 1st Bn. CSM Bobby Lane.

And there is no doubt that the connection is real for veterans alike.

"Seeing the paratroopers here at Arlington will very quickly put you back in time," Inglesby said, "Even though there is quite a number of years difference — it doesn't matter."

After the wreath-laying, the 1st Bn. soldiers and 509th veterans placed a unit plaque inside the Memorial Display Room.

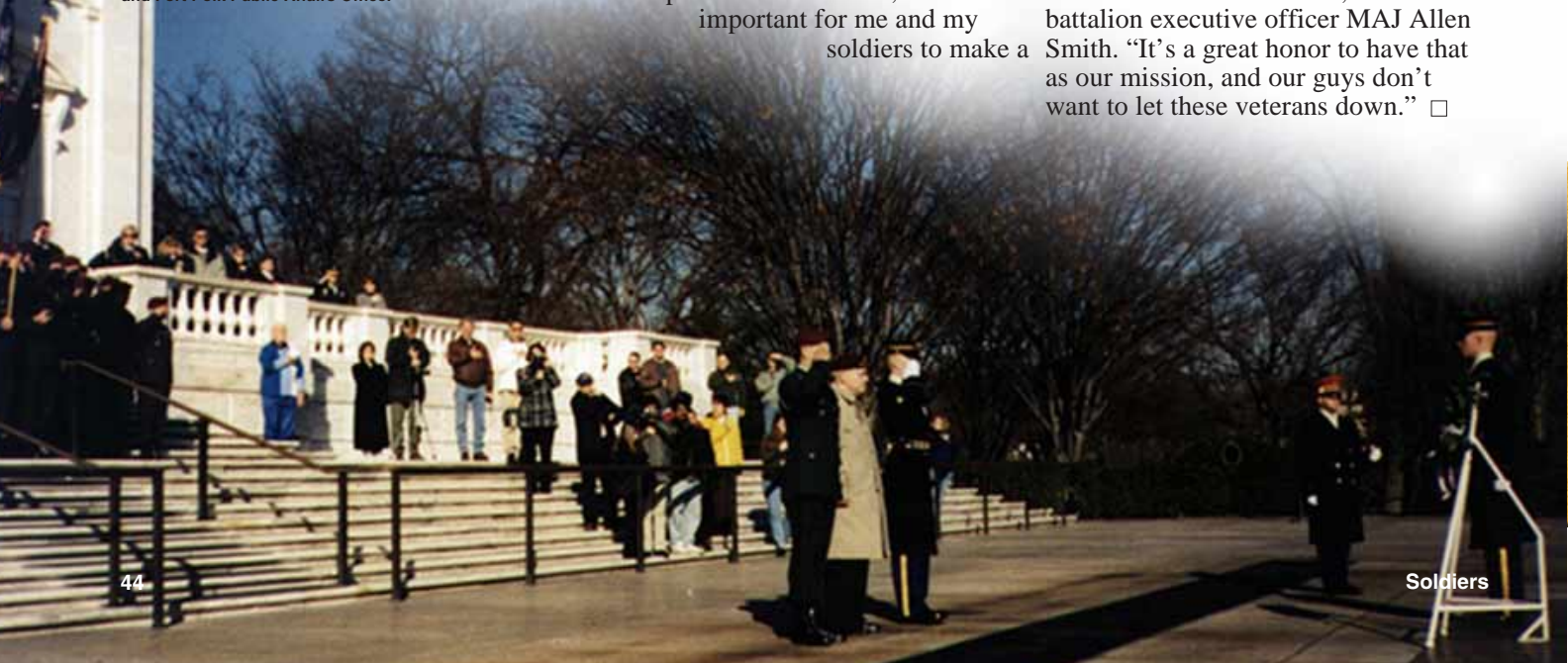
"You should have seen it. We got our plaque placed right in the front row. All these years our unit was never a part of this national display; now all can come see Geronimo," said Inglesby.

"There is still a connection from 1942 to 2000," Jarkowsky insisted. "It's the spirit that we hold as paratroopers. We see the history and connection."

Jarkowsky reminded his soldiers that the day's events at Arlington are important, and challenged them to learn more about their history.

"Originally, the 509th was tasked to lead the way into combat, and now we train others for combat," said battalion executive officer MAJ Allen Smith. "It's a great honor to have that as our mission, and our guys don't want to let these veterans down." □

Paula Schlag is the media relations officer in the JRTC and Fort Polk Public Affairs Office.





509th Veterans Remember

NICK DeGaeta was not one to pass up \$50 a month. The offer came from an "experimental" Fort Benning, Ga., unit that was looking for soldiers willing to jump out of airplanes and face long odds on survival. DeGaeta says his first thoughts were, "What a great deal; I'll double my pay and do something meaningful."

The World War II veteran from Staten Island, N.Y., is one of the hundreds and eventually thousands who became part of the 509th Infantry Regiment, which calls itself the Army's first paratroop unit and first American airborne group to deploy overseas, in June 1942.

Flying from England to North Africa in the longest airborne invasion of the war, the 509th performed its first combat parachute jump on Nov. 8, 1942. By war's end the unit had completed five combat jumps — three

into North Africa, one into Italy and another into southern France.

"There was a lot of anticipation in that first jump," said Leo Inglesby of Silver Springs, Md. "We had very bad weather going over Spain, and most of us were airsick because of the turbulence."

Today, many of the WWII 509th veterans find it difficult to recall some of the battlegrounds where they fought and many of their comrades who died. Others say they will always remember the physical and mental strain of warfare or the emotional strain of pulling lifeless or wounded "brothers" into fox holes while being raked by machine-gun fire.

"Time and time again I pulled them in," DeGaeta said as he moved his arms in a slow, heavy motion, as if reaching for a comrade once again.

"It was hard," said Marty Galuskin, from Bronx, N.Y., one of DeGaeta's lifelong

friends. Even so, the word was out that the 509th was one of the best outfits in the Army, Galuskin said.

He said that being American troops working with the British 1st Airborne Division made the 509th a bit of a stray unit, which is reflected in the unit's patch, designed by LTC William Yarborough, who then commanded the 509th.

The patch includes a stylized A, representing a paratrooper ready to exit the door of an aircraft, above the word "Geronimo." The 509th had already completed its third combat jump before finding a seamstress in Italy who could create the emblem.

Nearly 6,000 men served in the 509th during World War II. It is one of the most decorated airborne units of WWII, and one of its members, CPL Paul Huff, was the first American paratrooper awarded the Medal of Honor, for actions at Anzio, Italy. — *Paula Schlag*



Join the 509th

THE 1st Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment, is looking for qualified paratroopers to serve in the opposing force at the Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, La. The unit is looking for infantry, armor, military intelligence, signal corps, engineer and field artillery officers. Available enlisted positions include MOSs 11B, 11C, 19D, 31C, 31U, 52D, 63B, 71D, 71L, 75B, 75H, 88M, 91B, 92A, 92G, 92Y and 96B.

For more information, contact CPT Terry Brannan at (337)531-9848/7509 or (DSN) 863-9848/7509, or e-mail Hernanh@polk-emh2.army.mil. — *Paula Schlag*